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## **Doing Re-Enacting. Invisible Gestures of Protest. An Interview with Barbora Klímová**

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Abstract: Sandra Frimmel's and Kata Krasznahorkai's interview with Barbora Klímová.

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## Doing Re-Enacting. Invisible Gestures of Protest

*An Interview with Barbora Klímová*

Sandra Frimmel and Kata Krasznahorkai

### Keywords

Czechoslovakia; Brno; re-enactment; performance; urban space/environment; bodily memory; architectural memory; archive.

SF/KK: It is already more than a decade since you re-enacted seminal performances by Czech performance artists (Vladimír Havlík, Jiří Kovanda, Karel Miler, Jan Mlčoch, and Petr Štembera) in your project *Replaced-Brno-2006* – so this project has itself become history. How would you define your own role in ‘doing’ performance history through re-enacting historical pieces (e.g. overlapping, revealing, overwriting history)?

BK: I am not sure whether I can evaluate my role in ‘doing’ performance history. However, I realise that the perception of performance of the 1970s and 1980s has changed fundamentally since then. In 2006 when I started the project, the art of the 1970s and 1980s was still reflected from the perspective of its witnesses in the Czech context. In general, it was not such a topic as it is today. There weren't any alternative ways to observe it. More recently young scholars, capable of intergenerational and international connections and confrontations, started to deal with it. And, of course, the role of the artist plays a role in this respect.

Recently, in some context, I showed my videos to students, and I came to the intense realisation that they had become a history, especially in terms of form, but in content as well.

My aim was to establish a dialogue with the past, to point out historical moments, and to try to relate to them somehow, and I'd be glad if a connection with the present could be found.

SF/KK: How did you decide to address the genre of performance while you were engaged in urban planning and architecture? How is the urban environment ‘acting’, in our sense also ‘co-doing’ performances as both ‘actors’ have changed: the performer and the urban context?

BK: It was more a coincidence. At the same time, I was interested in the transformation of the public environment in Czech cities after 1989, the various forms of unusual behaviour on the streets, and at the same time some essential historical performances. In the same way as these performances I could have used articles from a newspaper to document unusual events on the street at this time. But they didn't exist. There weren't many happenings in public spaces, except the official celebrations. I also had problems finding performance in an urban public environment; there were just a few. The tradition of a street culture may not have been broken only within this era. Its absence probably has deeper roots. I wanted to look at how people react to special, perhaps archaic gestures in different environments.

There are conventions, customs, but also much more subtle forms of traditions, which affect how we feel, behave on the streets. And that was my interest.

The dialogue with the original authors revealed the differences in how I perceive and how they perceived public space. For them it barely existed, or it was so clearly affected by the stigma of the time that they were doing their performances rather in an imaginary vacuum. I've been trying to convince them to reflect on the environment of their performances, the specific reactions of passers-by. They remembered it only in general terms. So the interviews reveal, among other things, a misunderstanding, which I consider to be an important part of my work in the end.

SF/KK: Both the performer and the urban environment are archives themselves. How would you interrelate bodily memory (as 'doing' the archive) and architectural memory (as unearthing the archive) today?

BK: I am not sure if I am able to answer that question. So I would just point out a common element in the context of both types of 'archives', which is a documentation.

In this case photographic and textual. Documentation in both form and content for me has been and still is an extremely inspiring source, as it archives that which wasn't intentionally archived.

SF/KK: Which means and options for historicising specific performances do you as an artist use that differ from the methodology of art or performance historians? What are your specific gateways and how are you using them in your work beyond *Replaced-Brno-2006*?

BK: For the *Replaced-Brno-2006* project it was essential that I chose only those aspects of the historical performances that were appropriate to my intention, so I significantly shifted their meaning and at the same time opened them up to the possibility of being followed-up, to bring a new interpretation. Generally my approach is very subjective concerning choice of artists, moments in the past, and their treatment. My work within and beyond *Replaced-Brno-2006* is based on personal meetings and dialogues with artists from previous generations. So there is a need for some degree of sympathy, openness. But, as I already said, misunderstanding is an integral part of this kind of dialogue. Only sometimes a common language, interest, or contact area can be revealed. And those I think are crucial for my work. Writing a text or curating an exhibition is based on my own artistic practice.

SF/KK: Doing performance history in reenactment is also an act of communication on many levels – beyond the verbal one. How do these layers of non-verbal-communication strategies enter your work as a researcher and as an artist?

BK: Non-verbal communication with random passers-by is evident from performance documentation. It is interesting that although I initially approached my remakes purely in terms of research, a level of personal experience, a feeling, which was so important for the original authors, overwhelmed the rational part in the end.

Gradually, I also realised the importance of communicating with the original authors, artists of previous generations. Of course, gender, age, empathy, concern, which may be expressed nonverbally play a role in it.

SF/KK: How would you reflect on the role of gestures in transmitting history? You mentioned in an interview that you selected anti-theatrical performances with minimalist gestures that were all the more political as they were invisible in the socialist context. Invisibility but presence at the same time in the public urban space was political resistance. How are these gestures used in *Replaced-Brno-2006* and what are the gestures of protest today in urban space?

BK: Generally I saw in their transfer a kind of suspension of a time. I realised how fragile some of the gestures are. For example when Karel Miler leaned to the ground on the curb. Sometimes they seemed to me at the edge of embarrassment. For example when Vladimír Havlík planted a flower instead of a cobblestone. Concerning the context, today's situation is far more heterogeneous than in the 1970s and 1980s. According to witnesses there were basically two sorts of actors and respondents (for and against the political regime) any gesture that deviated from what was considered normal could be perceived as opposition. Today the performances could even be considered jokes with a hidden camera, advertising, or alluding to other meanings.

There are so many creative moments in contemporary social activism. I mean group events where a bunch of people collectively do some sort of gesture, etc.

SF/KK: The social transformation that took place up to 2006 is reflected in your re-enactments. But for the last 12 years a new, also deep transformation of former socialist societies has taken place. Do you think that re-performing historical gestures of protest in public space can contribute to a new protest culture today – specifically in that historical and geographical context?

BK: The notion that re-performing historical gestures "of protest" could contribute to a new "protest culture" today sounds a little exaggerated to me. All of the artists I interviewed denied their performances served as a protest, or were politically motivated. Of course, I am not suggesting that we couldn't see them this way today. But their authors emphasise far more subjective or even aesthetic motivations. (They often mentioned testing the limits of their bodily experience etc.) I would rather agree that repeating these actions could boost sensitivity to unusual, uncanny street events.

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## Bios

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Barbora Klímová since 2011 has led the Environment Studio at Faculty of Fine Arts, Brno. Through her artistic projects she explores various aspects of the local cultural history, particularly Czechoslovakia in the 1960s–80s. *Mutually. Artists and communities in Moravia in the 1970s – 80s* (Prague: Tranzit 2013).

Kata Krasznahorkai is Gerda Henkel Senior Researcher at the Slavic Department of the University of Zurich. *Artists & Agents. Performance Art and Secret Services* (ed. with Sylvia Sasse, Leipzig: Spector Books 2019). Forthcoming: *Operative Art History or Who is Afraid of Artists?* (Spector Books: Leipzig 2020).

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